

**GENDER, SEXISM, AND MARRIAGE PRACTICE IN CONTEMPORARY CHINA: A
STUDY OF “SHENGNÜ” (“LEFTOVER WOMEN”) IN POPULAR MEDIA**

Next year I’ll be thirty. This month, I’ve already received invitation cards from five of my classmates. Three of them are first month celebrations; one is a hundred day feast. One was a wedding invitation...but they are getting married for the second time! ¹

— --*Let’s Get Married (Women jiehun ba*, Dir. Jiang Liu, 2015)

Anxiety about late marriage is a common theme in contemporary Chinese cinema. In the scene above from the 2015 film *Let’s Get Married*, the tearful protagonist Gu Xiaolei confronts her long-term boyfriend, lamenting his unwillingness to commit as she is growing older. She cries passionately, imploring him to marry before she reaches the “advanced” age of thirty. Throughout the film, Gu Xiaolei is not anxious because she is unattractive or unsuccessful. She is eager to wed because she has internalized a socially expected—and I would argue sexist—timeline for marriage and motherhood that is quickly passing. As a representative of women in Chinese media, the character Gu Xiaolei is not unique; Chinese film and television programming in recent years is replete with female characters like Gu. Their preoccupation with marriage, age, and social pressure reflect enduring, and in this case resurgent, discourses of sexism in Chinese society.

The legacies of sexism, in China and worldwide, take diverse cultural and linguistic forms. These ingrained practices influence not only behavior, but modes of thought and self-perception. The recently coined term “*shengnü*” is one such linguistic reflection of sexism in contemporary China. Literally meaning “leftover women,” the Mandarin term “*shengnü*” (剩女) was officially formalized by the Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China in 2007. The Ministry of Education defines “*shengnü*” as highly successful unmarried women over

¹ Translation is provided by the English subtitling in *Let’s Get Married*.

the age of 27 with advanced degrees (Wang, 2011). The ways in which the term “*shengnü*” is employed in Chinese official discourse and popular media imply that women in this category present a social problem. However, is this the case? Or is the label itself a social problem? In this essay, I explore the interplay of media representations, social change, and audience reception in constructing and perpetuating the language of “*shengnü*.” I ultimately found that “*shengnü*” discourse is not based in demographic or social realities, but serves as a means of social policing in light of anxieties about changing gender dynamics and power structures. The terms “*shengnü*” and “leftover women” will be used throughout this study, not to legitimize their usage or suggest that they are accurate descriptors, but as a means of exploring language as a construct in gender discourse. I will use quotations when referencing both terms to remind the reader of what I believe is the artificial nature of these categories. Throughout this paper the intersection of language, media, and self-perception will be explored, with the goal of tracing the ways media creates and influences views of “leftover women.”

In any nation, entertainment and media play a significant role in shaping popular discourse and influencing public opinion. In China, television shows such as *Let's Get Married* (Zanmen jiehun ba, 咱么结婚吧), *If You are the One* (Feicheng wurao, 非诚勿扰), and *iPartment* (Aiqing gongyu, 爱情公寓), exemplify media representations that contribute to “*shengnü*” discourse. These three hugely popular series all feature “*shengnü*”: often as the butt of jokes (as in *If You are the One*) or as woebegone women forced to make choices between the stigma of being an educated, unmarried woman and the desire to have a family (as featured in *iPartment* and *Let's Get Married*). As media is the primary avenue for the popular regularization of “*shengnü*” discourse, exploration of television programming featuring “*shengnü*” is instructive. To investigate the intersection of “*shengnü*”, gender roles, and media representations

of women, I selected three television shows for analysis. I chose each show both for its popularity and for features that make it representative of specific categories of media: *Let's Get Married* offers a more realistic, fictional account of love and romance; *If You are the One* shows the treatment of “leftover women” within a reality show format; *iPartment* depicts a fictionalized and comedic discussion.

Although there has been a significant amount of recent scholarship on the “*shengnü*” phenomenon, my research adopts a new approach to this work. Most academic examinations of “*shengnü*” explore one element informing “*shengnü*” discourse, often focusing on marriage practices, government language, or examining the responses of women. Methods to engage with and explain the topic of “leftover women” can be broadly placed into four approaches: economic (Wang, 2011, Qian, 2012, Gaetano, 2014, Tian, 2013, Yu and Xie, 2013, Wei and Zhen, 2014), institutional (Fincher, 2015, Ji, 2015, Gaetano, 2009, Gaetano, 2014), social (Cai and Feng, 2014, Gaetano, 2009, Gaetano, 2014, Ji 2014, Wang, 2011), and demographic (Wang, 2011, Hong Fincher, 2014). More broadly, all of these studies approach the topic of “leftover women” through largely sociological research examining its causes or results. In contrast, my study approaches “*shengnü*” not as an accepted demographic reality with a causal explanation, but as a process of discursive construction.

To examine “*shengnü*” as a construct, I chose four levels of analysis: a close media reading, sociological research, examination from a gender studies perspective, and independent interviews. The first layer of analysis uses concepts from gender studies to understand how media works as gender discourse through the scholarship of gender theory. The second is a close reading of popular media texts, examining the themes of the three case studies in order to understand “*shengnü*” representations within their content and language. A third level of

exploration is a comparison between media presentations of “*shengnü*” and information about demographic and marriage practices derived from sociological research, with the aim of assessing the validity of the claims they make about “leftover women.” Finally, I conducted independent interviews to apply methodologies from reception studies to explain how both male and female viewers make sense of the term “*shengnü*.” The aim of combining these approaches is to adopt a multidisciplinary lens to a term whose impacts and significance spans disciplines and theoretical approaches.

When viewed as reflective of the discourse on “leftover women,” the case studies reveal that media can both construct and reinforce how the term “*shengnü*” is received and interpreted, even when these representations don’t match social reality. “*Shengnü*” discourse operates through complex mechanisms, including social policing, gender as performance, and indirect sexism to establish normative and stereotypical gender expectations. These rigid definitions create perceived binaries between marriage and family on the one hand and career and educational attainment on the other, while they also blame women for marriage difficulties. The case studies establish the narrative of “leftover women” through use of tools and methods explored in gender studies research. In the three programs examined, indexing and indirect sexism normalize gender stereotypes. Separate from an institutional and wider social context, “leftover women” lacks a clear interpretation. However when used repeatedly through shows such as *Let’s Get Married*, *If You are the One*, and *iPartment*, “*shengnü*” becomes part of what gender studies scholars refer to as “semantic derogation of women.” Normalization of “*shengnü*” terminology, stories, and characters that should be rejected as outdated and offensive has nuanced impacts on women themselves. While some reject the idea of “leftover women,” others subscribe to this belief system. The cognitive dissonance of the “*shengnü*” discourse makes

restrictive and normative gender narratives difficult to combat, as women themselves have conflicting ideas and self-perceptions.

This research has led to the following conclusion: rather than reflecting realities of China's marriage market, the rise of "*shengnü*" terminology communicates the emergence of sexist messaging as a conflicted response to women's empowerment. Even as women have enjoyed greater gains in the workplace and in education, "*shengnü*" language reflects the vestiges of public resistance to shifting gender dynamics. Although traditional social practices such as universal and early marriage remain largely true in China despite shifts in female educational and labor force participation, propagation of "*shengnü*" as a construct reflects public anxieties about new ways of imagining and doing femininity in China. In response to shifting power dynamics, "leftover women" has become a term that reinforces stereotypical and restrictive gender norms.

Gender, Language, and Gender Discourse: A Theoretical Framework

The field of gender studies offers a useful theoretical framework to understand "*shengnü*" discourse. Central to the discussion of "leftover women" are concepts of gender, femininity, and gender discourse that can be profitably explained through gender studies scholarship. These frameworks offer insight into the tools of discourse construction and gender identity more broadly that are not unique in the Chinese context. Examining more universal trends in gender theory increases the applicability of this study as a global reflection of gender discourse, media, and power dynamics. I selected the following materials because they have strong explanatory potential for aspects of "*shengnü*" discourse construction, including language and power relationships, language and sexism, and language and gender.

Most post-structuralist feminist thinkers view gender, and thus gendered language, as a constructed phenomenon (Bing and Bergvall, 1996, Weatherall, 2002, Sunderland, 2004, Cameron, 1998, Bergvall, 1996, Mills and Mulaney, 2011). As such, gender can be established through repeated interactions and routines (Weatherall, 2002, West and Zimmerman, 1987), as a performance, (Bergvall, 1996) and as an act of social policing (Bing and Bergvall, 1996). The gender binary can serve diverse purposes, but many point to gender as a means of preserving existing social hierarchies and power relationships (Weatherall, 2002, West and Zimmerman, 1987, Bing and Bergvall, 1996, Bergvall, 1996).

Language as an element of maintaining and perpetuating gender binaries is a subject of considerable contemplation in gender studies scholarship and shapes how “*shengnü*” discourse is imagined and expressed in China. Language, gendered language, and gender discourse serve several purposes and arise through complex mechanisms. Gendered language can emerge as a result of contradictions between reality and social constructions (Bing and Bergvall, 1996). It can oppress (Mills, 2011, Lakoff, 1990, Schultz, 1990) and exist through interconnections with social context and institutions (Cameron, 1998, Sutherland, 2004, Christie, 2000, Mills, 2008). Irony and humor also play a role in reinforcing sexist narratives, as they delegitimize objections (Lakoff, 1990). Through this structure, language associated with women is increasingly given negative and sexual connotations (Schultz, 1990).

As a construction, gender can be established as a mode of repeated behaviors that are reinforced over time (Weatherall, 2002, Zimmerman and West, 1987). In this vein, the relationship between sex and gender is not a foregone conclusion, but a manufactured, “interactional accomplishment” that is created through repeated and reinforced interactions (Weatherall, 2002). As a practice of interaction and reaction, social practice is the mechanism

for creating and maintaining gender norms. In Chinese popular media, “*shengnü*” representations help to normalize and routinize rigid concepts of gender, blurring the distinction between gender and performance to suggest that gender has an inherent definition.

West and Zimmerman (1987) draw further distinctions between gender constructs, differentiating between sex, sex category, and gender. Sex is defined as biological markers, sex category is the social recognition of those markers, and gender is the performed and produced interpretation of those categories. In this approach, gender is established as a “routine,” or through activities of everyday interactions that guide what is termed “masculine” or “feminine.” As a construct, gender roles serve as a mechanism to maintain the status quo of existing power relationships. This perspective shifts focus from the internal and innate to the “interactional” and “institutional,” arguing that gender is both an outcome of and rationale for social interactions. As I will discuss further below, social interactions as an impetus for gender norms is evident throughout media representations of “*shengnü*,” in which women modify gendered behavior in reaction to relational factors.

In the course of social relationships, gender is also a “socially situated, ongoing performance” (Bergvall, 1996: 175). This is illustrated by Bergvall (1996), who explores how gender is devised and adjusted, through a study of language and gender among female engineering students. For these students, issues in language and discourse arose as particularly salient, as they are studying in a traditionally “male” field. Bergvall examines how and when students displayed stereotypically male characteristics (assertiveness, competitive, recognition seeking), and feminine characteristics (cooperative, consensus-seeking). Findings indicate that students’ behavior wasn’t fully subsumed by this binary, but blended both “male” and “female” behaviors. While within a social context “feminine” qualities were rewarded, the education

system rewarded “masculine” systems of knowledge and assertiveness. When faced with these contradictions, female students need to mediate being “masculine” in the classroom, and “feminine” within a social setting. The need to modify behavior in reaction to social context is echoed in the independent interviews discussed below, as well as through the characterization of the protagonist Hu Yifei in *iParment*. Both of these examples explore the ways that “*shengnü*” is a concept established in reaction to context-specific gender expectations.

Bergvall’s study reinforces the idea that gender is constructed through everyday interactions against the backdrop of social expectations, which accords with views of gender as a spectrum (Bing and Bergvall, 1996,) or a “process,” which people must “orient to and do” (Sunderland, 2004: 17). After this orientation, gender is integrated and incorporated in discourse through language. Gendered discourses position men and women to behave in different ways based on stereotypes and representations that are pre-formed. Within this framework, “*shengnü*” discourse exemplifies how language fueled by misperceptions can impact behavior and expectations.

Bing and Bergvall (1996) speak to the disconnect between stereotypes and reality, a mismatch that is reflected within “*shengnü*” discourse. While gender stereotypes are specific and seemingly fixed as a construction reflected in language, gender is a continuum. Just as the color spectrum or the distinctions between linguistic dialects is often blurred, so is gender. For this reason, many words in the English language have been created to label those who do not accord with this manufactured binary (including: transgender, sissy, tomboy). Those who fall outside of this dichotomy are “either ignored or subject to boundary policing,” (Bing and Bergvall, 1996: 6). As a tool of policing, language can assist in construing women as fundamentally different, with the aim of justifying the need for male control. Bergvall and Bing speak to language tropes

in policing, saying “assertive woman may be nudged back into their approved roles by being labeled *aggressive bitches*” (pages 6 and 7). For Chinese women, “*shengnü*” is an equivalent tool of language policing; the threat of being labeled “leftover” motivates conformity to marriage norms.

More broadly, sexism and gendered discourses can be seen as a product of hierarchies and power relationships, not individual biases. Sexism is defined throughout this paper as stereotypes, biases, and discrimination on basis of sex and gender. Institutional inequalities and struggle for power and resources can fuel sexist narratives as a means of preserving power relationships (Mills, 2008, Cameron, 1998, Sunderland, 2004, James and Clarke, 1992, Zimmerman and West, 1983). This, I argue, is the dynamic that we find in “*shengnü*” discourse. While institutions may shape mission statements, charters, and constitutions to align with aims of equal opportunity and modernity, action does not always accord with this stated purpose (Sunderland 2004).

When viewing gendered discourse in the context of power relationships and institutional hierarchies, it becomes clear that sexism is not captured in single words or phrases with universal meaning. Instead, sexism is communicated through references to the belief systems they encapsulate. For example, “*shengnü*” or “leftover women” is insulting on a personal level, but becomes a sexist statement through referencing the social imperative to marry. Marriage expectations, as well as other social and power dynamics, are not stagnant. Just as power dynamics transform over time, language is also a fluid social negotiation. As such, stereotypes are context-specific and arise as a process of interpretation. These stereotypes are damaging because they perpetuate perceptions that often clash with an individual’s way of viewing themselves (Mills, 2008). For example, a 30-year-old doctoral student may not feel that marriage

is her preeminent life goal, and therefore may be conflicted by the implications that the “*shengnü*” stereotype presents.

Language can serve as a tool of oppression, used to present and constrain men and women in certain ways through normalizing unequal gender roles (Mills, 2011). As a nexus of gender and power, language is a “site where social inequalities and conflicts may have significant effects” (Cameron, 1998: 443). Power and status affect the formation of assumptions and inferences. Therefore, gender hierarchies are not stagnant, but conditional, fluid, and circumstance-dependent. As women are challenging traditional power hierarchies in China, “*shengnü*” discourse emerges as a reaction against these transformations.

One issue addressed in this study is the ways in which “*shengnü*” discourse produces damaging consequences for consumers of popular media in China. As a constructed discourse, damage does not occur as a result of one usage, but from connections with institutional contexts and as a result of links between discourses (Sunderland, 2004, Christie, 2000). Discourses do not exist alone, but “exist in constellations” to connect and inform each other (Sunderland, 2004: 45). The utility of linking discourses is clear, as “a speaker’s meaning is more easily accessed when it draws on ideas and perspectives that are generally accepted across a community” (Christie, 2000: 130). While utterances could have multiple meanings, it is only in reference to established presuppositions that a unified understanding is clear. An analysis of “feminist pragmatics” explores how the meaning of individual words or phrases is produced in context. As such, language items do not “‘contain’ meaning but can best be seen as triggers that generate meaning,” (Christie, 2000: 91). Establishing meaning is a process of examining the implications and assumptions of what they have said. For example, saying “You think like a woman” is not

inherently insulting, but becomes derogatory when drawing on stereotypes of women as overly irrationally or emotional.

Linking assumptions and implications can be seen in “*shengnü*” discourse through connecting “leftover women” to views of women in education and in positions of power in the workplace. For example, jokes about women in higher education are one source of legitimization for the “*shengnü*” discourse. A popular joke references the perceived undesirability of female doctoral students, saying that there are three genders of students: *nansheng* (男生 male student) in first place, *nüsheng* (female student 女生) in second and *nü boshi* (女博士 female Ph.D.) in last place. Female doctoral students are further construed as *qianghan* (强悍) or *biaohan* (彪悍), which translates as sturdy, brave or tough, but in colloquial usage equates with unflattering masculinity (a related word, *hanfu* 悍婦, is a way to refer to a shrew).

Creating and reinforcing networks of sexist language produces a gender discourse in which language itself reflects negative associations. Schultz (1990) points to the “semantic derogation of women” as an effect of gender discourse. This degradation means that words associated with women come to have a negative, often sexual, connotation over time. For example, Schultz points to “lady,” “dame,” and “mistress,” as terms that have come to be associated with negative occupations or women who hold low status within the social hierarchy. When viewed through the lens of semantic derogation, “*shengnü*” is another step in the process of associating women and language with negative connotations. While mistress or dame evolved over time, “*shengnü*” has been an insulting and degrading term from its inception.

The “*shengnü*” discourse also operates through a language mechanism that Sunderland (2004) calls “indexing.” In this process language derives meaning from networks of meaning, which helps people to “index” phrases, or to connect terms to broader social reference points.

Indexing, or the suggestion of a socially accepted and universal meaning of a linguistic term, is a key component of the performance and manufacturing of identity. For example, parents may dress a baby in blue to indicate that he is a boy. Similarly, linguistic indexing uses language to reference broader social constructions. Sunderland (2004) provides the example of a woman reminding her colleague to wear a coat on a rainy day. The coworker then responds, “Thanks Mom!” Without a common social understanding of the role of mothers, this comment would not make sense. However, against the backdrop of mothers as homemakers and caretakers, this response teases the woman for her adherence to traditional gender roles.

“*Shengnü*” discourse is gendered and stereotypical through subtle, implicit forms of sexism, which have arisen worldwide as women have gained greater social and financial independence. These shifts in power dynamics have impacted the way women act and behave. As women’s empowerment has provided women with increased avenues to self-advocate, women are less likely to tolerate workplace discrimination and sexism. However, this doesn’t mean that they are equal to men or not subject to conflicting ideas in other contexts. This conflicting dichotomy leads to oppositional stereotypes. While ideals of women’s empowerment are propagated, indirect means of sexism endure. Within this context, language is still used to be sexist, but not with the same terms or methods as in the past. As many of the central tenets of feminism are accepted as commonplace, efforts to legitimize and regularize gender hierarchies are strategically asserted in more subtle ways (Mills, 2008, Cameron, 1998).

Mills, 2008, calls these implicit forms of sexism “indirect sexism,” an important component of perpetuating sexist gender discourse. “Indirect sexism” includes subtle use of language in a manner that makes offering objections difficult. For example, use of the word “girl” to refer to adult women is a form of “indirect sexism,” as it may be perceived as too

inconsequential to be objectionable. Humor, irony, and stereotypes are other key elements of implicit sexism. Jokes are particularly useful at defusing objections, as humor delegitimizes critiques by painting the listener as overly sensitive (Lakoff, 1990). Irony is another form of “indirect sexism,” as it places burden on the listener to share in the joke, implying that if the listener does not comply then they are uptight or excessively politically correct. I will show below how humor becomes an important tool of “indirect sexism” in the representations of “*shengnü*” in *iPartment*.

Media is one of the most important ways that “*shengnü*” discourse is promoted in China. Scholarship has shown that media, language, and gender discourse are complexly interlinked, as media can both expose and reinforce sexist discourse (Walsh, 2001, Mills, 2008). Presentations of women both challenge existing stereotypes and further preconceived notions. While media may hold popular appeal and serve as a source of enjoyment, programs that present problematic representations of women must be unpacked, not accepted for blind consumption (Spigel, 2004).

Through its use in media, “leftover women” as a term and construction is normalized and de-problematized. Acceptance of “*shengnü*” as a means of designation and self-identification both furthers inaccuracies and restricts women. “*Shengnü*” discourse uses indirect sexism, stereotypes, indexing, and social policy to preserve patriarchal hierarchies. While the term “leftover women” has emerged as a topic for scholarly exploration in recent years, research focusing on the role of media featuring “*shengnü*” is still limited and warrants further contemplation².

² Zhen and Sun (2014) is the only study that explicitly explores “*shengnü*” within the context of popular media. More work is devoted to the role of state media in propagating the term. Hong Fincher (2015), Larson (2012), and To (2013) discuss the role of government publications in shaping “*shengnü*” discourse.

Representations of *Shengnü*: Comparing Television with Reality

To explore the ways that “*shengnü*” is portrayed in Chinese media, I will explore representations of “*shengnü*” in *Let’s Get Married*, *If You are the One*, and *iPartment*. The message created by the television shows examined, and others like them, constructs social expectations that push women towards marriage and stigmatize educational achievement. Deceptive depictions of “leftover women” heighten pressure on “*shengnü*” to adhere to traditional gender roles and meet restrictive social expectations. Inherent in this perspective is the demand that women—not men, institutions, or popular perceptions—must work to mediate contradictions between marriage and personal achievement. Through a uniformity of narrative, media representations of “*shengnü*” limit objections to sexist discourse. The three case studies, *Let’s Get Married*, *If You are the One*, and *iPartment*, each present untruths and misperceptions that have little basis in reality, including misleading messages about the marriage crisis and educational trends. While educational achievement is depicted as strange or abnormal, trends in higher education communicate the opposite conclusion. Similarly, the marriage rate in China remains largely universal, however media representations of *shengnü* present female marriage patterns as a pressing cause for anxiety. Thus, rather than reflecting reality, “*shengnü*” discourse can be better understood as a social policing mechanism that seeks to preserve patriarchal gender constructions.

The first television show under examination is the realistic drama, *Let’s Get Married*. This program was chosen for its commercial appeal as a dramatic piece and its relevance across mediums. The online television show gained significant popularity, enough to warrant a 2015 movie adaptation. Both the television series and the movie feature a dramatic, fictional depiction of contemporary Chinese relationships, in contrast to the “reality show” dynamic of *If You are*

the One. The adaptation of the series into a film conveys the appeal of this structure of narrative and suggests that these stories resonate with a broad Chinese audience. All three shows are extremely successful, thus reflecting mainstream preferences and sensibilities.

Let's Get Married premiered on November 6, 2013, and is produced in partnership with the Beijing Perfect World Television Company, the Beijing Hualu Baina Film Company, and Beijing Perfect Peng Rui Television Culture Company. The series spanned fifty episodes, airing from 2013 to 2014. In *Let's Get Married*³, themes of age as oppositional to marriage and social fulfillment are created and reinforced through plot and characterization. Additionally, social policing is used to restrict the acceptable gender continuum, link age as destructive to marriage desirability, and imply that “leftover women” are responsible for resolving this issue. In this show, a thirty-two year old woman named Yang Tao is trying to find “Mr. Right,” despite being disadvantaged by her “advanced” age. Yang Tao eventually falls in love with thirty-five-year-old Guo Ran, however Yang Tao is forced to abandon her personal goals in order to start a family. Yang Tao forsakes an opportunity to attend a premier design school in France in order to have a child. Despite the turbulence involved in this decision, the show depicts the final outcome as a fairy-tale happy ending, reflecting the belief that women must choose between work and family, and are most fulfilled when they value family over career or educational achievements.

Social pressure is another agent reinforcing marriage age requirements. For Yang Tao and Guo Ran, their mothers represent social expectations and anxieties. In the opening episode of *Let's Get Married*, flashes of a confident and put-together Yang Tao and Guo Ran are intercut with scenes of their mothers at a dating agency, establishing dating profiles for their children.

³ Quotes from *Let's Get Married* are translated through a combination of my own translation and accompanying English subtitles.

Yang Tao's mother cheerfully describes her daughter's name and occupation, but hesitates when asked Yang Tao's age. At first, she says, "Let's say thirty" ("Let's Get Married-Episode 1...", 00:00:42). After stern prompting, she emotionally admits that her daughter is, in fact, thirty-two. Yang Tao's mother's hesitancy in admitting her daughter's age communicates that age is a deficit of which to feel ashamed, a feature that will harm, not help, her daughter's dating prospects. Guo Ran's mother confirms this message. When she provides her own detailed list of requirements, she says emphatically that any wife for her son "Can't exceed thirty years of age! If she is older than thirty, then she is a 'leftover woman,' she should be left off!" ("Let's Get Married-Episode 1...", 00:01:35).

This excerpt from *Let's Get Married* legitimizes marriage hypergamy and universal marriage as central causes of "*shengnü*" discourse and anxieties. Hypergamy refers to the imperative that women should marry "up" to a man of a higher socio-economic class and educational level. Beijing radio personality and "*shengnü*" Huang Yuanyuan succinctly described the situation, saying, "There is an opinion that A-quality guys will find B-quality women, B-quality guys will find C-quality women, and C-quality men will find D-quality women," and as a consequence, "The people left are A-quality women and D-quality men. So if you are a 'leftover woman,' you are A-quality" (quoted in Magistrad, 2013). Sociologist Yong Cai summarizes the effects of hypergamy on the Chinese marriage market by saying that "men at the bottom of society get left out of the marriage market, and that same pattern is coming to emerge for women at the top of society" (quoted in Subramanian and Lee).

Implicit in the practice of socioeconomic hypergamy is the practice of age hypergamy, or older men marrying younger women. Reinforcing age hypergamy as a marriage practice means that men are under less pressure to marry at an early age. As a result, it is more socially

acceptable for men to devote a longer period to career and personal development. Professor Yi Songguo, a sociologist focused on issues of marriage and interpersonal relations, found support for this practice in China. In a 2008 study, he found that 77.9 percent of husbands marry younger wives and 1.7 percent were of the same age. 20.4 percent are younger than their wives, but were generally separated by an age gap of three years or less. Instances of an age difference of more than three years were rare, accounting for only 3.2 percent (Yi, 2008).

Through reflecting the social reality of hypergamy and presenting a response, *Let's Get Married* conveys that women are responsible for marrying early in order to alleviate social pressure and constraints. For Yang Tao and her mother, creating a dating profile appears to be an attempt to avoid becoming a leftover “A-quality” woman, suggesting that it is the responsibility of women to mediate sexist and antiquated expectations. In comparison, the motivations for Guo Ran’s dating profile are not construed as an effort to combat a deficit, but as a natural next step. Guo Ran is pushed towards marriage because he has now reached an age where he is able and expected to support a family, not for fear of being called unwanted. When asked her son’s age, Guo Ran’s mother can admit with a smile that her unmarried child is thirty-five years old. In comparison to the reaction of Yang Tao’s mother, Guo Ran’s age is treated as natural and routine.

More broadly, *Let's Get Married* presents marriage as an ideal and social requirement for both men and women, using structural elements ranging from title to plot. Although Yang Tao faces a greater psychological burden as a result of her single status, for both Guo Ran and Yang Tao marriage is assumed, an expectation that is a legacy of marriage patterns historically. Throughout Chinese history, the marriage rate has been almost universal, creating a marriage requirement that scholars sometimes refer to as the “marriage must.” According to Yong Cai, a

sociologist and demographer at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, “In most societies of the Western world, there is always at least 10-15 percent of the population that remains single, but in China, until the 1980s, that percentage was always less than 1 percent,” (Lake). A 1982 population study confirms Yong’s assertion, finding that the marriage rate for women in this period was close to 100 percent and the unmarried rate for men was 2.5 percent (Guo and Deng). Later studies affirm the continuation of this trend. A comparative study of 2000 and 2005 data shows that only 2 percent of women ages 30 to 34 remain unmarried, compared with 10 percent of men (Jones and Gubhaju). Another 2005 study found that as age increased, the marriage rate drew closer to 100 percent. Between the ages of 35 and 39 the unmarried rate for women reached 0.7 percent and the 4.8 percent for men (Ji and Yeung). This data suggests that a more apt term within media would be “leftover men,” as they are the group that is more likely to remain single. Despite or perhaps due to this reality, popular discourse has propagated the term “*shengnü*” instead.

The disconnect between demographic realities and presentations in “*shengnü*” discourse reflects the impact of media in transforming social perceptions and policing behavioral norms. Evidence of continued nearly universal marriage sharply contrasts with anxieties presented in *Let’s Get Married*. In the show, the imperative to meet universal marriage expectations creates conflicting imperatives for Yang Tao and Guo Ran. Despite the insistence of their mothers, Yang Tao and Guo Ran reject marriage in word if not in deed, saying in unison “Marriage is the grave of love,” (“Let’s Get Married-Episode 1...”, 00:01:56). Although Yang Tao may claim to be happy with her current singlehood, this definitive rejection is undermined in a subsequent scene when Yang Tao looks on as another couple marries. She tearfully tells a friend, “Who pursues me?! No one but time” (00:03:28). This pessimistic and emotional perspective furthers the idea

that Yang Tao has the most to lose from remaining single. Yang Tao exemplifies the contradiction of the “marriage must,” marriage practices, and personal goals. Despite career success, her status as “*shengnü*” leads to conflicting feelings that both subscribe to and reject the “leftover women” narrative. While she pursues opportunities to study abroad and expresses opposition to marriage, the weight of social pressure and expectations leads her to mediate personal desire in favor of familial commitments. Portrayal of Yang Tao’s decision as the ideal path for fulfillment is revealing, as it communicates that despite conflicting feelings towards social expectations, women will ultimately find happiness in according with traditional preferences.

In *If You are the One*⁴, images, stories, and testimonies of self and externally labeled “*shengnü*” support gender stereotypes that links marriage to womanhood. In *If You are the One*, rigid normative gender roles are preserved through social policing and as a performance, to communicate that education is detrimental to marriage prospects for women. The program presents marriage both as necessary and as the primary career for women; attacks educational achievement as shameful or abnormal; and communicates that it is the responsibility of women, not men, to mediate the mismatch of marriage expectations. The testimony of Xu Yali and Li Lina, two contestants on *If You Are the One*, speaks to how media representations of women can further “*shengnü*” stereotypes. Xu Yali indexes career as detrimental to marriage prospects, while Li Lina overtly urges women to marry early or risk becoming unwanted.

A common explanation for the emergence of the “*shengnü*” discourse is that career achievement conflicts with marriage prospects. One contestant, a thirty-two year-old associate professor of sports medicine named Xu Yali, opens with the statement, “I do not like to tell

⁴ Quotes from *If You are the One* are translated by Wei and Zhun (2014), with my own modifications.

others that I am a female Ph.D.” This statement indexes doctoral degrees as a source of shame for women, reinforcing the concept that higher education for women is something foreign or perverse, a deficit that must be concealed. Although Xu Yali has used educational advancement to meet the demands of the labor market and find a job within the competitive field of academia, these same achievements are presented as being anathema to marriage prospects in this logic. Although there is no inherent disconnect between female workplace participation and marriage and motherhood, narratives such as those presented in *If You are the One* normalize a sexist reality, in which conflicting demands of the labor market and the marriage market limit women’s relationship choices (Wang, 2011, Qian, 2012, and Gaetano, 2014). While the competition within the labor market creates demands for higher educational achievements and credentials, these degrees may hurt marriage prospects (Wang, 2011). Other studies also suggest that education is broadly advantageous for men, while it may prove detrimental to women’s ability to marry, particularly in societies where women are responsible for the majority of the housework (Tian, 2013). Within the Chinese context, analysis from Qian (2012) of the Chinese General Social Survey found that as educational level increases, marriage prospects worsen for women and improve for men. In aggregate, these theories confirm qualitative findings that Chinese women face conflicting gender role and workplace expectations (Gaetano, 2014) and mirror sentiments expressed in popular shows such as *If You are the One*.

The acceptance and internalization of perceived contradictions between career achievement and marriage desirability is underscored by the testimony of another contestant. This woman, a twenty-eight year-old CEO of an IT company, asserts, “Marriage is a women’s [primary] career” (*If You are the One*, September 2, 2012). This contestant’s statement exemplifies the challenges of indirect sexism and social policing. While the contestant doesn’t

say that work and educational achievement are forbidden for women, she does make it clear that these are lesser paths. Also, her status as an educated woman lends credence to her statements about career and marriage. This statement of indirect sexism conveys the irony and injustice of the continued centrality of marriage for femininity in China. Even to a woman who has achieved a top position in a private technology firm, a rarity in both China and the United States, self-perception and social policing maintains marriage as integrally linked to womanhood. Placing marriage, and by extension the home and motherhood, as a women's primary duty recalls language of separate spheres of influence from Western nations. Under this paradigm, even women who are successfully engaging in work outside the home have failed, as they have rejected the sphere in which they are supposed to exist (Kursten, 2003). "*Shengnü*" discourse works to police women who defy traditional gender roles, as it reinforces the concept that those who operate outside of their "appropriate" sphere are undesirable.

Throughout *If You are the One*, judgments equating age and marriage desirability make explicit that women are responsible for resolving marriage difficulties, with the threat of social sanctioning when women do not comply. In discussing her romantic life, thirty-two year-old contestant Li Lina, a career institute instructor, spoke directly to the plight of "*shengnü*." She urged her "fellow unmarried sisters both on and off the stage," not to "miss out on finding a good man to marry off yourself to in the most beautiful time of your life; otherwise when you reach my age, how embarrassing!" (*If You are the One*, May 11, 2013). Li Lina's perspective on marriage and aging is illuminating, as it communicates her perspective on ideal romantic conduct for women.

Narratives such as the perspective of Li Lina on *If You are the One*, further communicates how internalization of "*shengnü*" discourse impacts women and creates a cycle of

misperception. Li Lina presents later marriage as abnormal or pitiable, an assertion that is not supported by demographic trends. Inherent in this narrative is the notion that the practice of universal marriage in China is threatened. However, Chinese marriage research suggests that trends of universal and early marriage have largely remained true in contemporary times (Ji and Yeung, 2014). The persistence of marriage anxieties despite a lack of supporting evidence for a trend of increasing unmarried women suggests that media and popular discourse plays a large role in creating and furthering gender misperceptions.

The virulence of public fears over marriage patterns suggests that representations of “*shengnü*” are effective in perpetuating misperceptions not supported by reality. Studies from Xie and Yu suggest that this trend may be shifting from early and universal marriage to later and more selective marriage (Xie and Yu, 2013). Other studies confirm these findings, indicating that practices of universal and early marriage may be transforming along with other cultural, economic, and political changes in China (Gaetano, 2014, Larson, 2012). These studies suggest that age at first marriage is increasing for urban men and women since the 1980s, but do not suggest that practices of universal marriage are under threat. Since 1987, the national marriage rate has declined. From 1992 to 2005 alone, the number of couples registering for marriage fell by 3.5 million, despite increases in population. In 1985, the average age of marriage for men was 23.6 and for women was 21.8. By 1999, those ages had increased to 24.8 for men and 23.1 for women. For post-One Child policy urbanites, these numbers are even more dramatic. In Beijing, the average marriage age for men is 28.2 years, for women, 26.1 (Gaetano, 2014). In 1995, only 2 percent of urban women ages 30 to 34 were unmarried. By 2008, this number had increased to 6 percent (Larson, 2012).

These demographic trends suggest that “*shengnü*” may not be leftover, but reflective of

larger economic and social changes impacting Chinese society more broadly. While there have been shifts in marriage practices in China, these changes do not constitute a crisis, nor is late marriage a problem that “*shengnü*” are responsible for resolving. Although Chinese marriage rates continue to be relatively high, abundant media representations of “leftover women” presents unmarried women as a widespread source of anxiety. The disconnect between narratives of a “leftover women’s” marriage crisis and actual marriage practice realities that show relatively small numbers remaining unmarried creates tremendous social pressure on “*shengnü*” to adhere to a constructed marriage timeline. In this view, the onus is placed on women to accord with traditional marriage preferences or risk social stigma. For Li Lina, feelings that she “missed out” on an opportunity to find a spouse transform her from a young woman subject to marriage pressure to someone who is an agent in constructing social pressure through the narratives she perpetuates on the show. She speaks directly to “unmarried sisters on and off the stage,” posing as both a friend and wise advisor in avoiding becoming leftover.

On *If You are the One*, interviews with male contestants reflect a similar, if more colorful, emphasis on the imperative for women to meet male standards. A male participant, Hu Juchao, asserted that his ideal woman would be like a “Z4 model car,” in that “in our future life, you [the women] will make decisions over trivial matters, while I control the steering wheel and make decisions over which main direction to go” (*If You are the One*, June 9, 2013). Use of the automobile analogy and assertions about who is in the driver’s seat points to a fundamental question about marriage as a means of mediating social control. With the Chinese practice of men providing cars, apartments, or property in marriage, men may “control the steering wheel” as a natural extension of control over property and inheritance. What is not clear from the participant’s response is what will happen if women are not the deferential Z4 models, but get in

the driver's seat. If women are in control, will this contestant be unwilling to get in the car? What would it mean for women to hold the steering wheel? Fear of a shift in power hierarchy is a component furthering the “*shengnü*” narrative. “Leftover women” discourse is reasserted as a means of social policing as women are empowered in both educational and career spheres.

Additionally, comparison of women to automobiles furthers the process of female objectification, a trend that is reinforced and supported by an increasing focus on commercialized, consumerist culture in China (Wei and Zhen, 2014). With the rise of megacities and a growing middle class, gender-normative advertising and commercialization emerges. For women who do not conform to sexualized and reductive images of femininity projected in this capitalist discourse, being “leftover” is both a threat and a strategy to encourage uniformity of behavior. If women persist in resisting social norms, then they face social sanctioning from indirect sexism projected through media representations of women. Media representations such as *If You are the One* do not enforce direct forms of sexism, such as barring Ph.D. women from competing, but use more insidious methods, such as promoting language that degrades educated women.

The final show, *iPartment*⁵, was chosen for its comedic structure that both delegitimizes and exaggerates the challenge of being a “leftover woman.” By treating the discrimination faced by the “*shengnü*” character as an object for laughter, the show dismisses the seriousness of this sexist narrative. Conversely, the supposed difficulties of life as a “leftover woman” are heightened and normalized by contrast in the show's style; which juxtaposes a glossy, laugh-track narrative with rare moments of true emotional anguish from the “*shengnü*” character. *iPartment*'s characterization of protagonist Hu Yifei reinforces restrictive concepts of acceptable

⁵ I translated quotes from *iPartment* through a combination of my own translation and accompanying English subtitles.

gender roles and constructs an education/marriage binary. The program communicates a friction between increased educational achievement and established social hierarchies and power relationships through Hu Yifei's gender performance as a woman whose educational achievements have resulted in masculine characteristics.

iPartment, premiered on August 5, 2009 and ran for four seasons. It was produced by the Shanghai Film Group. *iPartment* bears striking similarities to popular American sitcoms such as *Friends* or *How I Met Your Mother* in its content, plotline, and character development. As such, *iPartment* caters to a young, urban audience for whom western-style shows are appealing. *iPartment*'s wild popularity guarantees that it is influential in shaping views of female doctoral students and “*shengnü*” among viewers who tend to be younger and urban.

Stylistically, *iPartment* is glossy and upbeat, complete with frequent use of laugh tracks and popular culture references. Even in an idealized and lighthearted sitcom universe, marriage is reinforced as ideal, meaning that even in a comedic realm there is no escape from social expectations of romance and relationships. In this show, indirect sexism is reinforced through plot, characterization, visual imagery, and even musical choices. The opening credits exemplify how over-the-top and comedic depictions routinize normative concepts of marriage. It features laughing friends high-fiving, frequent hearts overlaid onto the screen, and a clip of a lavish wedding scene. Love and marriage are the driving forces in the characters' lives, especially for “*shengnü*” Hu Yifei. Hu Yifei is a female Ph.D. student who works as a graduate lecturer at a university. Through characterization of Hu Yifei, *iPartment* presents education as oppositional to femininity. Not only does Hu Yifei's degree attainment impact her interpersonal relationships and personality, it also isolates her and transforms her into someone with stereotypically male qualities. Hu Yifei exemplifies the stereotype that a highly educated woman is basically a *nü*

hanzi 女汉子(a female man) or a woman who is masculine and unfeminine. She is a source of constant jokes as she attempts to reconcile her academic life and love life. Although she ultimately changes elements of her personality to address the stigma she faces as a female doctoral student, Hu Yifei is initially portrayed as tough, aggressive, and domineering, all qualities that are not associated with traditional femininity. A female Ph.D. is presented as something unusual, unique, and abnormal, a message that is not supported by recent educational trends in China.

Hu Yifei and Zeng Xiaoxian both face social sanctioning that limits the ways they operate in relationships. As the series progresses, Hu Yifei must address the increasing difficulties of reconciling her status as a female Ph.D. student with her desire for a relationship with Zeng Xiaoxian, one of the male leads. She feels that love reflects weakness and she can't reveal feelings of attraction, as she is the platonic "big sister" or "mother" figure for her group of friends. Hu Yifei's position as a female Ph.D. student is also the source of doubt for her would be boyfriend, Zeng Xiaoxian, who constantly questions his feelings for her because of her perceived social undesirability as a female doctoral student/"*shengnü*." Social pressure in *iPartment* impacts both men and women through prescribing what type of woman is an appropriate subject for male attraction.

Despite messaging in *iPartment*, there is no demonstrated disconnect between women and higher education, suggesting that the narrative that shames female education is serving a different purpose than reflecting reality. While Hu Yifei is portrayed as unusual, abnormal, and unfeminine for her educational achievements, the higher education landscape since 1949 has demonstrated no such contradiction between gender and educational achievement. In 1949, total graduate enrollment in China was 629 students (Li, 2010). From 1949, these numbers have

skyrocketed, with 1,158,623 students enrolled in graduate programs in 2010 (China Education Center, 2014). While there were only 790 female graduate students in 1963, by 1985 that number rose to 16,216, accounting for about 19 percent of total graduate enrollment (UNESCO, 1990). From 1998 to 2002, average female enrollment at colleges and universities doubled, moving from 38 percent to 44 percent of total enrollment. In 2007, women accounted for 47 percent of total enrollment. Female doctoral students increased most rapidly, rising almost 10 percent in four years. At Fudan University and East China Normal University in the “*shengnü*” heavy city of Shanghai, this trend is particularly apparent. In 2006, the Fudan University freshman class was comprised of 52.5 percent females, surpassing male enrollment for the first time in the university’s history. At East China Normal University, the ratio of men to women is 2 to 3 (Wang, 2008). The paradigm shift of women in higher education in recent years demonstrates the gains to gender equality and empowerment within China. Women are increasingly able to pursue educational opportunities and achievement at the highest levels. This trend of empowerment in education sharply contrasts with the endurance of sexist views of marriage and femininity, suggesting that while “*shengnü*” may enjoy gains in the classroom, their status within the home still largely conforms to traditional gender expectations. The emergence of “*shengnü*” discourse against the backdrop of increasing opportunity in education and labor force participation is telling, as it indicates a potential backlash against reform to traditional imaginings of gender in China. In this way, the term “*shengnü*” may reflect deeper fears about the future of Chinese society, in which men and women have equal access to educational and job opportunities.

If Hu Yifei’s educational focus and achievements are not unusual, but reflective of a growing trend, then it raises the question: why is female education still constructed as

oppositional to femininity? Answers may be found in the first episode. In an early scene, Hu Yifei is not shown while her younger brother introduces her, describing her to a stranger as elegant, quiet, and impressive. The next scene shows the real Hu Yifei who, in contrast to her brother's characterization, is managing a wedding with the loud and uncultured aggression of an angry tiger. With the deadly efficiency of a feared general, Hu Yifei yells into walkie-talkies with shrill, clipped phrases. The contrast of Hu Yifei's description and her behavior creates a comical scene, reinforced by her exaggerated movements and excessively severe dialogue. Through synthesizing humor with an unflattering depiction of Hu Yifei, *iPartment* employs indirect sexism to regularize "*shengnü*" narratives.

Although she is portrayed as beautiful, organized, and highly efficient, her commanding manner is both rude, threatening, and clearly emasculating to her colleagues. Hu Yifei's experiences as a "*shengnü*," an unwanted woman in a man's world, have created this threatening and unpleasant person. Her femininity is still apparent from her beautiful exterior, but tempered by the learned behaviors which are implied products of her educational and career achievements. Through this characterization, *iPartment* alludes to a causal relationship between advanced educational attainment and a loss of femininity, indexing female education as a threatening social force. The Hu Yifei narrative communicates that obtaining a Ph.D. makes women less feminine. This concept constructs a no-win binary; either women must chose personal advancement or accord with gender ideals.

The stereotypical narrative of a necessary choice between education and feminine appeal is reinforced from other sources within *iPartment*. Zeng Xiaoxian, a male protagonist and Hu Yifei's love interest, echoes earlier messaging that education and career are not only unhelpful, but may be harmful, to women's fulfillment. As a charismatic radio host, Zeng Xiaoxian's

perspective on marriage and ideal womanhood is legitimized through characterization. As a suave, desirable, and attractive man, Zeng speaks authoritatively on marriage, motherhood, and ideals for female fulfillment. On the role of women he says, “What is the biggest dream of women? That’s right, to put on a wedding dress and walk down the red carpet of happiness”(iPartment, 00:08:25).

The contrast between Zeng’s “logical” perspective and Hu Yifei’s misguided views are further established when Zeng Xiaoxian and Hu Yifei interact for the first time. In their initial introduction through planning a wedding, Hu Yifei is controlling and unreasonable, which contrasts starkly with Zeng Xiaoxian’s measured, although slightly exasperated, calls for greater teamwork and respect. Similarly to Hu Yifei’s first scene, the contrast of their communication styles is exaggerated, creating an incongruity that is geared to produce laughter. This introductory scene not only testifies to the negative effects of educational attainment, but also reinforces the man as rational trope. Despite Hu Yifei’s characterization as essentially male, she is still afflicted by the irrational deficiencies of her gender, sending implicit messages about the limitations of women in the workplace. Through use of humor, *iPartment* perpetuates untruths about women in the workplace and in education.

An examination of *Let’s Get Married, If You are the One*, and *iPartment*, reveals a disconnect between sociological research and popular discourse. This gap between reality and presentation reflects a constructed attempt at social policing through use of tropes that are familiar to scholars in gender studies.

“Shengnü” and Reception: How Discourse Impacts Audiences

Through using the lens of reception studies, interviews can serve as an effective tool to examine “*shengnü*” discourse outside of media and explore the ways that personal testimony reflects internalized elements of the “leftover women” narrative. As a discipline, reception studies examines the ways in which texts are received based on time, place, and cultural context. As such, reception studies can make use of a small sample of interviews as “discourse on the media and everyday life” (Alasuutari, 1999). In addition to being shaped by time and place, reception studies also examines the ways in which texts or media interact with each other to impact perception. Hardwick (2003) argues that this discipline “is and always has been a field for the practice and study of contest about values and their relationship to knowledge and power” (pg. 11). Reception studies goes further than theorizing meaning; it also explores political, psychological, emotional, and cultural impacts of media representations (Staiger, 2005).

I conducted independent interviews at the University of Michigan, with the goal of better understanding the role of reception in response to “*shengnü*” narratives. The five respondents (four female, one male) were Chinese nationals studying in the United States. All respondents were familiar with the concept of “*shengnü*” and their testimony is aimed at providing an understanding of “*shengnü*” drawn from those impacted directly by this discourse. One was interviewed in person, two responded via email conversations, and two were interviewed via video call. All but one interviewee were female, and the respondents ranged in age from 24 to over 30 (one respondent was hesitant to report her age). Out of the selected respondents, two were married and the rest were single, but all indicated that they hoped to marry.

Through the process of interviewing Chinese respondents various themes emerged. First, social policing is established as a means of monitoring and ensuring conformity. Second,

respondents expressed differing views and responses to the concept of “*shengnü*.” Even limited interviewing reveals a diversity of “*shengnü*” perspectives and experiences that aren’t captured in the case studies above.

Social policing as a factor impacting “*shengnü*” was supported through independent interviews conducted on the University of Michigan campus. Even within the context of an American university, respondents reported that social pressure played a large role in reinforcing or manufacturing feelings of urgency or desperation, and they connected these feelings directly with the idea of “*shengnü*.” One respondent, a thirty-something university professor (she was hesitant to provide her age) spoke to the challenge of social pressure, lamenting,

Right now if Chinese young people reach a certain stage and haven’t found a significant other then they will feel tremendous pressure, because no matter if it is your own parents, friends, classmates, outside people in society that you know or who you don’t know all can pressure you....I will take myself as an example, when I was studying I of course didn’t want to find a boyfriend, I just wanted to continue studying and then when I got a job, find a boyfriend. But when I started working and my parents discovered [that I was single, they asked], “why is it that everyone else has a boyfriend? Why don’t *you* have a boyfriend? So then I suddenly became *shengnü*, so my parents said “you need to quickly find a boyfriend, that guy is fine, this guy is fine, anyone will do!” (Yin)

As is demonstrated in this response, perceived social pressure and stigmatization can lead to a mediation of marriage standards. Instead of adhering to ideal standards for a marriage partner, “*shengnü*” may feel that they must “settle” in order to reconcile social

demands and marriage constraints. As a young student with marriage marketability, the respondent made the decision to remain single in order to work towards career advancement. However, her parents greet her decision with increasing apprehension, treating her as an abnormality who should settle for anyone who “will do.” The respondent has experienced the conflation of age and marriage desirability, and has seen that women, not restrictive gender expectations, will be blamed for inability to find a spouse.

For the respondent, her parents make use of “*shengnü*” logic to serve as a social policing force. In this mode, the respondent’s parents operate similarly with the parents presented in *Let’s Get Married*, creating a parallel between reality and media representations. They ascribe blame for her single status and pressure her to make other choices. They do not ask, “do you want a boyfriend?” but instead interrogate “why is it that everyone else has a boyfriend? Why don’t *you* have a boyfriend?” This emphasis on comparison to peers and on individual culpability suggests a belief that if the respondent had only focused on her looks and romance, not her studies and career, she may have been able to secure a spouse. Like the “*shengnü*” discourse overall, this response reinforces the notion that education and career advancement are less central to women’s success than marriage.

The response of a man to “*shengnü*” discourse is reflected by the testimony of a Chinese male graduate student instructor at the University of Michigan. He points to women as responsible for the “*shengnü*” phenomenon. He said, “I think that if ‘leftover women’ become too numerous it would be a problem, but the solution depends on whether or not ‘*shengnü*’ are willing to get married and if they are willing to marry by a

marriageable age” (Ma). The respondent’s message demonstrates that he both doesn’t see “*shengnü*” as a crisis, but also ascribes to stereotypes and indexed understandings of the term. As a result of this manufactured definition of “*shengnü*,” he places the blame on women for this perceived phenomenon.

Interviews also reflected confusion over the appropriate reaction to the concept of “*shengnü*.” One respondent rejected the term altogether, arguing, “As far as I’m concerned, this isn’t a ‘leftover’ problem, this is a personal decision.” Another woman disagreed and connected “*shengnü*” to growing feminist sentiments. She asserted “Feminism in China is developing day by day, some women are excessively confident and are overly picky towards men their own age.” The disparate responses to the term “*shengnü*” reveal that women both accept and reject the title as reflecting reality, even if they would not happily accept “*shengnü*” as a term. An absence of agreement among women as to how to address the term makes this type of indirect sexism difficult to counteract because it is not universally identified as a problem worthy of challenging. While some women reject the ideas and messages of womanhood presented in popular media and through social interaction, common fallacies and misperceptions are difficult to abandon. Although universal marriage remains largely true, messages reinforced in media representations of “*shengnü*” further anxieties about female career and educational attainment.

Conclusion

As explored in *Let’s Get Married*, *If You are the One*, and *iPartment*, media presentations of “*shengnü*” both create and reinforce sexist messaging around womanhood and femininity. In *Let’s Get Married*, the binary between career advancement and family life is presented and continually reinforced, a message that is not reflected through long term trends in female labor force participation. In *If You are the One*, late marriage is presented as abnormal, while aging is

constructed as detrimental to marriage prospects. In reality, while studies have found support for increasing trends towards later and more selective marriage, total marriage rates in China remain nearly universal. In *iParment*, educational achievement is construed as oppositional to femininity and womanhood, a binary that is unsupported by recent educational trends in China. Despite sociological evidence that suggests a contrary perspective, all three case studies share a uniform narrative. This narrative presents “*shengnü*” as a problem, communicating implicitly and explicitly that *shengnü* should be a major concern, a social problem for which highly educated, socially empowered women are to be publically ridiculed and held responsible.

By increasing salience of “*shengnü*” within popular discourse and by restricting the range of acceptable perspectives on femininity and womanhood, these narratives further perspectives that do not align with reality but also have potentially negative impacts on women’s well being. These narratives impact the way women view themselves in relation to the concept of “*shengnü*” and ideal marriage choices. In contrast to this constructed message, China’s gender imbalance means that a surplus of men, not women, is a contemporary demographic reality. The construction and propagation of “*shengnü*” discourse signals two larger motivations. First, this manufactured term conveys a desire to deflect attention away from a surplus of young, unmarried men towards educated women. Due to their limited numbers and strategies of indirect sexism, “leftover women” are an easy scapegoat. It is far easier for television programs, state media, and cultural discussion to shame women into changing behaviors and patterns than it is to find a solution for the millions of surplus men that are a result of the One Child Policy. Second, “*shengnü*” terminology punishes women for behaviors and choices that defy traditional gender binaries and challenge existing power hierarchies. These popular culture references legitimize and regularize a term that should garner outrage, because of the ways in which they reinforce

discriminatory and sexist practices. Instead, these narratives are the set-up for jokes and drama. The combined message of these three programs within the larger social discussion of “*shengnü*” heightens social pressure on woman to marry, devalues female educational achievement, and minimizes objections to the sexist nature of the “*shengnü*” narrative. *Let’s Get Married, If You are the One*, and *iPartment*, are not unique in the ways they present rigid gender narratives. Media representations of women that do not reflect gains in empowerment or equality endure across national and cultural boundaries, and the “*shengnü*” discourse is just one of the many expressions of this global problem.

Bibliography

- Alasuutari, Pertti. *Rethinking the Media Audience: The New Agenda*. London: Sage Publications, 1999. Print.
- Bauer, John, Wang Feng, Nancy E. Riley, and Zhao Xiaohua. "Gender Inequality in Urban China: Education and Employment." *Modern China* 18.3 (July 1992): 333-70.
- Bergvall, Victoria L., Janet Mueller Bing, and Alice F. Freed. *Rethinking Language and Gender Research: Theory and Practice*. London: Longman, 1996. Print.
- Cai, Yong and Wang Feng. *Wives, Husbands, and Lovers: Marriage and Sexuality in Hong Kong, Taiwan*. Ed. Sara Friedman and Deborah Davis Stanford UP, 2014. Print.
- Cameron, D. "'Is There Any Ketchup, Vera?': Gender, Power and Pragmatics." *Discourse & Society* 9.4 (1998): 437-55. Web.
- Candace West; Don H. Zimmerman *Gender and Society*, Vol. 1, No. 2. (Jun., 1987), pp. 125-151.
- "China's 'Leftover Women' Unite This Singles Day." Xinhua, English.news.cn., 10 Nov. 2011. Accessed 23 Oct. 2014.
http://news.xinhuanet.com/english2010/china/2011-11/10/c_122263773.htm.
- Christie, Christine. *Gender and Language: Towards a Feminist Pragmatics*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2000. Print.
- Jacob, W. James. "Social Justice and Gender in Chinese Higher Education: Regional Issues of Equity and Eccess." In *Education and Social Justice*. Joseph Zajda, Suzanne Majhanovich, and Val Rust, eds. Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 2006, pp. 139-59.
- James, Deborah and Clarke, Sandra. Hall, Kira, Mary Bucholtz, and Birch Moonwomon, eds. (1992). *Locating Power: Proceedings of the Second Berkeley Women and Language Conference, Volume 2*. Berkeley: Berkeley Women and Language Group.
- Ji, Yingchun, and Wei-Jun Jean Yeung. "Heterogeneity in Contemporary Chinese Marriage." *Journal of Family Issues* 35.12 (2014): 1662-682.

- Ji, Yingchun. "Between Tradition and Modernity: "Leftover" Women in Shanghai." *Journal of Marriage and Family* 77.5 (2015): 1057-073.
- Jones, Gavin W., and Bina Gubhaju. "Factors Influencing Changes In Mean Age At First Marriage And Proportions Never Marrying In The Low-Fertility Countries Of East And Southeast Asia." *Asian Population Studies* 5.3 (2009): 237-65.
- Gaetano, Arriane. " 'Leftover Women': Postponing Marriage and Negotiating Womanhood in Urban China." *Journal of Research in Gender Studies* 2 (2014): 124-149.
- Gaetano, Arriane. 2009 "Single Women in Urban China and the 'Unmarried Crisis': Gender Resilience and Gender Transformation." In Roger Greatrex and Nina Brand, eds. *Working Papers in Contemporary Asian Studies*. Lund: Centre for East and South Asian Studies, Lund University, pp. 1-20.
- Hardwick, Lorna. *Reception Studies*. Oxford: Published for the Classical Association by Oxford UP, 2003. Print.
- "Higher Education." *Higher Education-China Education Center*. China Education Center, n.d. Web. 14 Dec. 2014.
<http://www.chinaeducenter.com/en/cedu/hedu.php>
- "iPartment-Season 1 Episode 1." "爱情公寓 第一季 第 1 集." (Aiqing Gongyu Di Yi Li Di Yi Ji.) YouTube. Hillwood Yang, 11 May 2011. Web. 14 Dec. 2014.
- Fei Chang Wu Rao*. 2010 –2015. Television Series. China: Jiangsu Satellite TV.
- Fincher, Leta Hong. "China's "Leftover" Women." *Ms Magazine Blog*. Ms. Magazine, 22 Nov. 2011. Accessed: 24 Oct. 2014.
<http://msmagazine.com/blog/2011/11/22/chinas-leftover-women/>.
- _____. "China's 'Leftover' Women." The Opinion Pages. *The New York Times*, 15 Oct. 2012. Web. Date Accessed: 20 Oct. 2014.
<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/12/opinion/global/chinas-leftover-women.html>

_____. *Leftover Women: The Resurgence of Gender Inequality in China*. London, England: Zed Limited, 2014.

"Goals and Missions." *Goals and Missions - All China Women's Federation*. All China Women's Federation, n.d. Web. 14 Dec. 2014.

<http://www.womenofchina.cn/html/womenofchina/folder/84-1.htm>

Lake, Roseann. "All the Shengnu Ladies." *Salon.com RSS*. Salon Media Group Inc., 11 Mar. 2012.

Accessed 20 Oct. 2014

http://www.salon.com/2012/03/12/all_the_shengnu_ladies/.

Lakoff, Robin Tolmach. *Talking Power: The Politics of Language*. New York: Basic, 1990. Print.

Lakoff, George. *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things: What Categories Reveal about the Mind*. Chicago: U of Chicago, 1987. Print.

Larson, Christina. "The Startling Plight Of China's Leftover Ladies." *Foreign Policy*. 193 (2012): 94, 98, 10. *ProQuest*. Web. 7 Oct. 2014.

Let's Get Married. Dir. Jiang Liu. Perf. Ivy Chen, Zuo Da, Yuan Yuan Gao. China Lion Film Distribution, 2015. DVD.

"Let's Get Married-Full First Episode: First Date 《咱们结婚吧》完整版 第1集 初相亲泼妇相示人." (Zanmen Jiehun Ba Wanzheng ban di yi ji chu xiangqin pofu xiang shiren.) YouTube. HLBN Official Channel, 10 Mar. 2014. Web. 14 Dec. 2014.

Liu, Haoming. "Economic Reforms and Gender Inequality in Urban China." *Economic Development and Cultural Change* 59.4 (July 2011): 839-76.

Li, Haizheng. *American Universities in a Global Market*. Ed. Charles T. Clotfelter. Chicago: University of Chicago, 2010. Print.

Luan Xiaohui 栾小惠. "Shengnü" 剩女 (Leftover Women). *Zou xiang shijie 走向世界 (Towards the World)* 16 (2010): 96-96.

Luo, Wei, and Zhen Sun. "Are You the One? China's TV Dating Shows and the Sheng Nü's Predicament."

Feminist Media Studies (2014): 1-18.

Magistad, Mary Kay. "China's 'Leftover Women': Unmarried at 27." *BBC News*. British

Broadcasting Corporation. Date Published: 20 Feb. 2013. Web. Date Accessed: 20 Oct. 2014.

<http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-21320560>

"Marriage in China-Guilt Tripped." *The Economist*. The Economist Newspaper, 07 Mar. 2014. Web. 14

Dec. 2014. <http://www.economist.com/blogs/analects/2014/03/marriage-china>.

Mills, Sara, and Louise Mullany. *Language, Gender and Feminism: Theory, Methodology and Practice*.

Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2011. Print.

Mills, Sara. *Language and Sexism*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2008. Print.

Newcomb, Tim. "Is This Chinese Sitcom Stealing Its Jokes from 'Friends'?" *Time Magazine: Arts*. Time

Inc., 18 Aug. 2012. Web. 15 Nov. 2014.

Qiu Changhai 邱长海 and Li Qing 黎青. "Shengnü shi lishi yiliu wenti" 剩女是历史遗留问题 (Leftover

Women is a Problem of Historical Legacy). *Zou Xiang Shijie*. 走向世界 (Move Towards the

World). 01 2011: 07. Oct. 2014.

"Ratio of Female to Male Tertiary Enrollment (%)." *Ratio of Female to Male Tertiary Enrollment (%)*.

The World Bank Group, n.d. Web. 14 Dec. 2014.

Schultz, Muriel, 1990 in Cameron, Deborah, ed. *The Feminist Critique of Language: A Reader*. London:

Routledge, 1990. Print. Pg. 134-148.

Staiger, Janet. *Media Reception Studies*. New York: New York UP, 2005. Print.

Si Maxiao. 司马笑 "Miss Shengnü." Miss 剩女。 (Miss Leftover Woman). *Zou Xiang Shijie*. 走向世界

(Move Towards the World). 18 2008: 95-96. 07 Oct. 2014.

Subramanian, Sushma and Deborah Jian Lee. "For China's Educated Single Ladies, Finding Love Is

Often a Struggle." *The Atlantic*, Atlantic Media Company. Oct. 19, 2011. Web. Date Accessed:

- 06 Oct. 2014. <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2011/10/for-chinas-educated-single-ladies-finding-love-is-often-a-struggle/246892/>
- Sunderland, Jane. *Gendered Discourses*. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004. Print.
- Qian, Yue. *Marriage Squeeze for Highly Educated Women?: Gender Differences in Assortative Marriage in Urban China*. Dissertation. Ohio State University, 2012. Print.
- "The Flight from Marriage." *The Economist*. The Economist Newspaper, 20 Aug. 2011. Web. 14 Dec. 2014.
- <http://www.economist.com/node/21526329>
- Tian, Felicia Feng. "Transition to First Marriage in Reform-Era Urban China: The Persistent Effect of Education in a Period of Rapid Social Change." *Population Research and Policy Review* 32.4 (2013): 529-52.
- To, Sandy. Understanding *Sheng Nu* ("Leftover Women"): The Phenomenon of Late Marriage among Chinese Professional Women." *Symbolic Interaction*, 36: (2013) 1–20.
- Wang Juyang 汪居扬. "Jiaoyu, renli ziben yu hunyin jiya—Jianlun 'shengnü' xianxiang" 教育, 人力资本与婚姻挤压—兼论“剩女”现象。("Education, Human Capital and the Marriage Squeeze- With A Discussion of the 'Leftover Women' Phenomenon.") *Zhongguo chengshi yanjiu* 中国城市研究 China Urban Studies. 6.3. (2011): 180-85.
- Women's Participation in Higher Education, China, Nepal, and the Philippines*. UNESCO Principal Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific Bangkok, Thailand: 1990. Print.
- Walsh, Clare. *Gender and Discourse: Language and Power in Politics, the Church and Organisations*. Harlow, England: Longman, 2001. Print.

Wang Zheng, "Gender, Employment and Women's Resistance," in *Chinese Society: Change, Conflict and Resistance*, 2nd ed., ed. Elizabeth J. Perry and Mark Selden, (London and New York: Routledge Curzon, 2003), 158-182.

Weatherall, Ann. *Gender, Language and Discourse*. Hove: Routledge, 2002. Print.

Wodak, Ruth. *Gender and Discourse*. London: Sage Publications, 1997. Print.

Xie, Yu, and Jia Yu. *Changes in the Determinants of Marriage Entry in Post-Reform Urban China*. Rep. no. 13-802. Ann Arbor, MI: Population Studies Center, U of Michigan, September, 2013. Print.

Zimmerman, Don and West, Candace. Thorne, Barrie, Cheris Kramarae, and Nancy Henley eds. *Language, Gender, and Society*. Rowley, MA: Newbury House, 1983. Print.